

*American Soc. of Psychical
Research x x x x x x x*

✓

FIRST REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON
EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY.

[Reprinted from Vol. I., No. 3, of Proceedings of the American
Society of Psychical Research.]



FIRST REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON
EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY.



FIRST REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY.

THE committee has received five hundred returns of Blank F,¹ with the answers to the questions concerning superstitions, and five hundred and fifty postal cards with the diagrams as requested. The latter promise interesting results, but in order to tabulate them in such a manner as to permit safe deductions it is necessary to spend more care and time upon them than has been possible in the short period which has elapsed since the collection was completed. Your committee, therefore, requests permission to report in full upon the drawings at a subsequent meeting of the Society.

The questions on Blank F were intended to test the prevalence of a tendency to superstition in the community. The first three questions were direct. The fourth was indirect, in that the answer depended upon a variety of factors; a number of persons expressed the opinion that the question was badly put. This opinion was gratifying, as it showed that the nature of the conclusion to be drawn from the answers to this question was not understood, and that therefore the answers were more likely to be entirely unbiassed.

It is evident that the questions 1-3² inquire not only whether the respondent believes in the superstition named, but also whether he has that form of half-belief, with which we are all familiar, when our reason approves but with doubt, or even actually disapproves, while

¹ See p. 269.

² Should you be influenced by any feeling (whether implying a belief or not, is immaterial) in regard to:—

1. Sitting down thirteen at table?
2. Beginning a voyage on Friday?
3. Seeing the new moon over your left shoulder?

there lingers in the mind a feeling, perhaps unreasonable and even provoking and uncomfortable, which we cannot shake off. Thus it may be presumed that no one in this audience believes in the efficacy of witches' love-potions or philters; but there are probably several who believe in the occurrence of mind-reading, or the reality of thought-transference as an actual possibility; while others, though they do not thoroughly believe in it, yet could not avoid an uncanny feeling if they encountered an instance of a vision of a distant dying person appearing to a friend. These examples serve to illustrate disbelief, belief, and half-belief respectively. If any one answered our questions negatively the answer implied entire disbelief; if affirmatively, then the answer either belief or half-belief. The form of the questions was selected purposely, because the committee regarded these superstitions as on the verge of extinction, and although faith in them was almost gone, they expected to find a certain lingering respect for them, just as true republicans, despite all reason, have involuntarily more awe for a king than a president. The answers show that the tendency to superstition is much more prevalent than we had anticipated.

The fourth question,¹ in regard to haunted houses, would naturally be answered with "Yes" more frequently, because not only the factors mentioned for the three previous questions, but others also, would lead to the answer "Yes." Some persons would like to see a ghost; others would like to prove that the haunting is all nonsense, and to secure their chance would prefer the haunted house. Others would fear that, though the house could not be haunted, yet it might be the secret resort of disorderly persons whose doings had given rise and circulation to stories about the house. Still others would be influenced by the expectation of difficulties due to superstitions of servants. The discussion of these and similar factors leads your committee to think that the question in the form put would bring out affirmative answers from, 1st, those who had belief or half-belief in regard to haunting of houses; 2d, those who thought the belief to have a sufficient standing in the community to earn for it a certain degree of consideration.

Some of the respondents have added explanatory remarks to their answers. A few of these remarks are quoted here as verifications of what has been said in regard to the mental attitudes assumed towards the questions:—

¹ Should you be influenced by any feeling (whether implying a belief or not is immaterial) in regard to:—

4. Choosing, on your own account, between two otherwise equally desirable houses, one of which was reputed to be haunted?

To 3, "I have no idea that seeing the moon over either shoulder has the slightest influence on anything that is to occur. Still, having heard the thing talked of when I was younger, I *almost* instinctively try to see the new moon correctly." To 1, "Slight feeling; no belief." To 2, "Not sufficient to stop me;" and another, "I should not mind beginning a voyage on Friday; but in making any experiment, or beginning on any serious and to me important work, I should prefer to postpone until next day." To 3 again, "Yes (slight passing uneasiness)."

To question 4, about the haunted houses, come many answers with remarks appended, of which the following are samples: "Yes, not only because hereditary tendencies are more prompt than ratiocinations, but also because I would not want to be bothered with finding out and remedying the mechanical causes." — "Practical considerations, such as servants, etc., would generally make me reject a 'haunted' house." — "Yes. Can't sell it again. Usually means rats." — "Personally no; although I might be influenced by likelihood of relatives or friends disliking to visit a house reputed to be haunted." — "I have thought over this (question) how ridiculous and foolish it is, yet I feel as though I must say yes." — "Yes; but only from the investment point of view." — "I think I should prefer to live in the ghostless house unless the other tenants were unusually quiet. My wife says, however, that she has always wanted to live in a haunted house." — "I should choose the haunted house, so it might afford the opportunity of exploding the superstition." — "I should suspect some cause for the reputation of a house being haunted, like rattling blinds, rats, bad drainage, closeness, etc. Moreover, I would rather live in a house where good people had lived than low and vicious ones. I have felt that influence." — "Yes, one day; no, the next." — "I have no fear of a haunted house. I fully believe in their existence." — "I should be anxious to investigate."

The answers, then, to the first three questions would indicate the prevalence of a *tendency* to superstition, while the answers to the fourth question would indicate the same, plus the willingness to treat a certain superstition with respect, or at least a show of it.

The answers have been tabulated according to sex and age, as shown in the following tables: —

TABLE I. MEN.

Age.	Total No.	QUESTION.							
		1.		2.		3.		4.	
		Yes.	No.	Yes.	No.	Yes.	No.	Yes.	No.
12-15 . .	3	0	3	0	3	1	2	1	2
16-20 . .	14	2	12	1	13	2	12	8	6
21-25 . .	50	4	46	5	45	7	42	24	26
26-30 . .	60	6	54	4	56	5	55	24	36
31-35 . .	45	3	42	3	42	6	39	14	31
36-40 . .	33	5	28	4	29	5	28	13	19
41-45 . .	30	2	28	1	29	2	28	13	17
46-50 . .	32	5	27	5	27	6	26	13	19
51-55 . .	15	0	15	0	15	1	14	8	7
56-60 . .	14	1	13	1	13	3	11	10	4
63-70 . .	6	0	6	0	6	1	5	2	4
72-78 . .	5	1	4	1	4	0	5	4	1
Not given .	2	0	2	0	2	0	2	2	0
Totals . .	309	28	280	25	284	39	279	136	172

TABLE II. WOMEN.

Age.	Total No.	QUESTION.							
		1.		2.		3.		4.	
		Yes.	No.	Yes.	No.	Yes.	No.	Yes.	No.
12-15 . .	5	0	5	1	4	2	3	4	1
16-20 . .	29	7	22	4	25	6	23	19	10
21-25 . .	33	3	30	8	25	3	30	27	6
26-30 . .	30	4	26	2	28	6	24	18	11
31-35 . .	21	3	18	5	16	8	13	14	7
36-40 . .	23	4	19	4	19	4	19	8	14
41-45 . .	11	4	7	2	9	3	8	7	4
46-50 . .	6	3	3	2	4	3	3	2	4
51-55 . .	11	4	7	1	10	3	8	9	2
58-63 . .	4	3	1	0	4	2	2	4	0
66-70 . .	3	0	3	0	3	1	2	3	0
Not given .	15	5	10	4	11	4	11	11	4
Totals . .	191	40	151	33	158	45	146	126	63

The comparison of these tables shows at once a marked difference between the men and the women. There are answers from 309 men and 191 women. The women are younger than the men, as is brought out in detail by

TABLE III.

Age . . .	12-15	16-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45
Men . . .	3	14	50	60	45	33	30
Women . .	5	29	33	30	21	23	11

Age	46-50	51-55	56-60	60-70	70-80	Not given
Men	32	15	14	6	5	2
Women . . .	6	11	0	4	3	15

The average of all the ages given is : —

Men : — 36·16 years.

Women : — 25·82 years.

The difference is presumably related to the character of the answers.

Of the men about one-tenth express a tendency towards superstition by answering questions 1, 2, 3 affirmatively. There being 309 respondents one-tenth would be nearly 31, and there are 28, 25, 39 affirmative answers to questions 1, 2, and 3 respectively. Of the women, on the contrary, about one-fifth answer affirmatively. The total number of women is 191, one-fifth would be about 38 ; the women answer *Yes* 40, 33, and 45 times to questions 1, 2, and 3 respectively, or $38\frac{2}{3}$ times on the average.

In regard to question 4 the result is similar ; considerably less than one-half the men (136 out of 308) answered *Yes*. Of the women, exactly two-thirds (126 out of 189).

If we compare next the fourth question with the preceding we see that the number of affirmative answers to question 4 is for men over four times, for women about three times as great as to questions 1-3.

Another point to be noted is that for the first three questions there is an order of precedence, which is the same for both sexes as regards the affirmative replies : —

Question.	Men.	Women.
3	39	45
1	28	40
2	25	33

The coincidence is probably not the result of chance, but indicates a prevalent order of preference, and we may say that there is more frequently a tendency to superstition about seeing the new moon over the left shoulder than about sitting down thirteen to table or beginning a voyage on Friday. The superstitions which are of distinctly Christian origin have less hold than the one which is purely pagan, at least by general repute. This curious fact will awaken several interesting questions in every one's mind.

In conclusion, it may be said that so far as our statistics go, — of the educated portion of our community, about one man in ten and two women in ten, have a tendency to superstition, and that about four men in ten, and six women in ten, are inclined to pay some attention to a superstition actually encountered. These proportions are not only very large in themselves, but much larger than your committee anticipated. The well-educated class of New Englanders is probably as rationalistic a body of persons as any geographical group in the world. The results of our statistics may be considered as fairly representative. Hence we must believe that even in the most rationalistic community there is to-day a large proportion of the individual members, especially of the women, whose minds inhabit the border-land, at least, of superstition. This discovery, as we believe our conclusion will appear to many of you, is very significant in view of the work which has been undertaken of collecting stories from the public, that is to say, from members of the public. It binds us to greater caution than ever, for reasons that are too obvious to require further exposition.

That women are more inclined towards superstition is probably due in part to the character of their education, in part to the absence of that buffeting with the world which brings men closer to actualities. How far the inclination is inherent in the feminine nature we leave undecided.

CHARLES S. MINOT, *Chairman.*

BLANK F.

AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH.

COMMITTEE ON EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY.

You are requested to fill up this blank and send it to the Secretary, RICHARD HODGSON, 5 Boylston Place, Boston, Mass.

All answers are private, and will not be shown, except to the Committee and its clerks.

Name,

Address,

Occupation,

Age,

Nationality,

Should you be influenced by any feeling (whether implying a belief or not is immaterial) in regard to:

	ANSWER. YES or NO.
1. Sitting down thirteen at table?	
2. Beginning a voyage on Friday?	
3. Seeing the new moon over your left shoulder?	
4. Choosing, on your own account, between two otherwise equally desirable houses, one of which was reputed to be haunted? . .	

